

Session 5 - Urban Farm Talk: Bee Keeping

March 8, 2014

Sadie Richards: How many of you are beekeepers now? How many have had your hives for more than a year or two? I took a class at NOFA and learned everything I know from an organic beekeeper and helped him co-found Boston Beekeeper's Club. Our next meeting is March 25th 7pm at Harvard. June 21st is our annual hive tour where we bike around hive to hive around the city. I was skeptical at first that I could keep bees in the city. There has been some recent legislation passed helping beekeepers to be legally keeping bees. I have two hives right now at a community gardens near Forest Hills and am working on setting up a teaching apiary at the Boston Nature Center throughout the summer, fall, and spring.

Noah Wilson-Rich: I founded the Best Bees Company in 2010 as a way to raise money for research on bees. My research is how to develop vaccines for bees and how to keep bees healthier. There is a lot of known information on how to keep bees healthy, but scientist haven't released the information to the public. For example, the USDA released a report in 2004 showing that probiotics are good for bees' health, but it sat on the library shelves for years until I happened to read it one day in grad school. So that's one of the things we do at the beekeeping lab. We're a group of 17 based in Boston. We're leaning toward becoming a public service that will be able to test bees from all different hives and providing support for how to treat them. I'm also involved in helping to guide legislative decisions about beekeeping, specifically with the Article 89 in Boston. Other cities have more difficult regulations and challenges for beekeepers, such as building fences or asking neighbors for permission. In Boston, it's seen more as a right, and Cambridge is starting this process as well. As beekeepers, navigating these regulations can be tricky. You have the decision to follow recommendations and regulations or to not. I help advise people and answer questions. But, no one enforces these things, so it's a self-regulating thing among beekeepers to follow the guidelines. Very few places in the city of Boston allow beekeeping outright. Some that allow it conditionally, but most places don't mention beekeeping at all. It's tricky because nothing says beekeeping is illegal or legal in Boston. That's why Article 89 is important. Now, it's up to beekeepers to unite and adopt Article 89 or to say we want it allowed outright. That's what's unique about Boston. To get training for beekeeping, Sadie has started an organic beekeeping class in Jamaica Plain.

Sadie: We just had our last session for Bee School 2014. We had honey tasting and made lip balm. It's really about confidence that you can tend your bees, then they tend themselves. You just have to look out for certain symptoms. You just give them the best home you can and network with other beekeepers. It's important to connect new beekeepers with each other and more experienced beekeepers. It will be offered again next spring. We're doing another 3-h class in March 18th—we just meet once. Noah is also teaching several classes like that at the Cambridge Center for adult-ed. Take that if you don't know if you want to be in beekeeping yet.

Noah: There are a lot of options for one day-couple hour courses. But this mentorship program is the best option. To get information for that, come to the Boston Beekeeper's Club March 25th at 7pm, 20 Oxford St. in Cambridge at Harvard.

Sadie: We also have a Google group, Boston Beekeepers' Club, as a forum for beekeepers. We're also working on creating a website.

Q1: Are you aware of anything in Central Massachusetts like what you're talking about?

Sadie: Yeah. The Worcester Beekeepers' Association. They have a meeting where a doctor from the USDA lab who will examine dead bees found in hives from all over the country for free. Then they'll report what diseases they've found.

Noah: In addition, the MA Beekeeper Association's website, Massbee.org, is a great resources. You can find schools that are offered, resources, and services.

Sadie: Their meeting in Topsfield at the Topsfield Fair Grounds on March 22nd. They meet twice a year.

Noah: There is another meeting in Boston City Hall about clarifying and making Article 89 easier on March 18th at 8am. If you have questions or just want to learn, it's a great opportunity.

Sadie: There are different types of hives. We're both involved with an organization called Classroom Hives. It's a non-profit in Boston that have been placing observation hives or glass frames of bees in classrooms around Boston, where students are able to observe the bees. There's also a lot of information about classroomhive.org as well.

Noah: It has been operating for 12 years. Older students can learn about geometry in the real world, and younger students can learn responsibility through educational beekeeping.

Sadie: I love teaching little ones to older ones to dive into my hives with me.

Noah: Everyone is invited to get involved and learn more.

Q2: What is the biggest issues with being an urban beekeeper vs. rural?

Sadie: Noah has some interesting data that shows that urban bees can generally do better because there is more diverse forage in what's flowering and when it's flowering. And, there's less use of pesticides in the cities. I would say neighbors are a challenge.

Noah: That's just based on my observations. I gave a Ted Talk on the topic two years ago. Look up Noah, bees online. Urban bees did better. They make more honey and survive the winter a bit better on average than surrounding areas in MA. The PR challenge is the biggest one. People don't know the difference between aggressive and non-aggressive honey bees. We only work with non-aggressive bees. Aggressive bees can't survive the frost in MA. Non-aggressive honey bees are different from any other type of aggressive bee. We need bees for the pollination of fruits and vegetables.

Q3: Do they sting?

Noah: They do sting.

Sadie: Only the females do.

Noah: And they die when they sting. They're not that willing to risk their lives, but it's important to know that they have stingers. If anyone needs an epi pen, you must get one from a doctor.

Q4: I was on the team that wrote the Somerville ordinance. When you're in a hyper-dense environment with parents with children and are terrified of their children, who may be allergic, there is a very real fear. So, we ask people to inform their neighbors. Why do you have an objection to that?

Noah: We've been able to get in the Boston public schools, which is where the kids and parents are, to help inform them. And the benefits really do outweigh the costs. But to deal with the uninformed or people who might be upset, at least in urban areas, the challenge is first finding the neighbors. Somerville you know where they are. In Boston, it's almost untenable to do so because of the hotels and you don't know whose living there. The neighbor factor is very challenging. And, bees are around in the environment anyway. So in terms of the liability issue, a kid with a severe allergy should have an epi pen. Most schools have epi pens because of the peanut allergies and teachers have been trained for that. It's a joint thing. Because bees are out in nature, you don't know where they're coming from.

Q5: My point is we're really trying to minimize neighbor conflicts. It's about legitimizing the practice with a permit. If you're doing everything right, then your neighbor can't call and demand that the bees be removed. A lot of beekeepers feel that we're creating extra regulations, but that's not really where that's coming from.

Noah: I think it has led to prohibitive effects where people can no longer have bees and do what they want on their property because their neighbors don't want it. In Brookline, for example, you have to be 100 feet away from the nearest structure and that forces people out.

Participant: Most yards are not even 100.

Noah: This is what I'm saying. It's prohibitive. People can't do it because the regulations are overly prohibitive. The cost or fine is also something that is unique to Somerville and Brookline.

Q6: Coming from the municipal side, it's not about creating more obstacles. It's about legitimizing and protecting the practice. Someone can't call and demand for hives to be removed if you're following the rules. The beekeepers are kind of upset about that, but it's not about discouraging. It's about legitimizing the practice and minimizing conflict among dense populations.

Q7: What are some steps for getting started beekeeping for someone who is interested?

Sadie: This isn't a list of steps but a list of resources for where to get bees and where to get supplies. I've put it up on the Google Beekeeper's website. Ordering bees should have been done yesterday. It's late in the season to order bees, but that's not to say that it's too late. But there are nucs mini hives for sale or you can build your own top bar hive. It's more challenging over winter, but it can be done. The Buzzing Rooster builds all of these locally. They're beautiful and affordable.

Q8: Do both of you wear the gear or are you brave yet?

Sadie: I wear my veil and sometimes gloves and jacket. I've only been stung 4 times in 4 years, and that was normally because I was rushing.

Noah: We definitely advise that. Safety first. When you're going into the beehive is when you have the risk of being stung, so you do have to be careful.

Q9: Any concerns with raccoons or wildlife at all?

Sadie: Yeah bears are getting closer to use and skunks can also be a nuisance. You can ratchet your hives shut with a strap, and I always put a rock on top. I did have a hive topple during a rainstorm because of unstable footing or mud.

Noah: Sometimes skunks can be a nuisance because they scratch on the side of the hive, and when the bee comes out to inspect, the skunk eats it. The solution is to raise it up a bit more.

Q10: How's the honey?

Noah: Great! There's a tasting downstairs. We're both going to be around later also.